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—challenged *Rousseauism*, or matched it. But the mood Rousseau conveyed went her. Like many contemporaries, he cited authority and tradition but, more call than his contemporaries, he rejected all authorities and all traditions. Beyond society and values of his time, the nevan challenged the tradition of manity and the authority of history. manity had gone wrong: Invented to a man's burdens, civilization constrained a more; intended to ease man's efforts, it ed for greater efforts all the time. Here the most radical revolutionary thinking l the most reactionary, disguised as rming fancies. Its soulfulness proved re effective than the rational, geometri-

mechanical Encyclopedists (whom he liked and who dis- d him) at selling the sion of a happier manity, of societies rning to wholesome ure, of fulfilling free- ns, even if individuals st be forced to be e, wholesome and py. In a dry, sane age, ertwarming poetic ilism proved more alluring than didac- propaganda—although poetic dreams on turned to nightmare, and all would l at the foot of the guillotine.

The *Confessions* is the continuation and nplement of Rousseau's thinking, more ly, stimulating, provocative than his nov- and more captivating because the author lresses us in the first person. It confirms hint provided in 1752 by his first play, *Le Devin*, whose hero falls in love with his n image—as a woman. At 40 as at 20 or 50 years old, Rousseau was fascinated by self, and the theater offered a first ortunity to disclose his secrets by way he characters he etched, as in a disguised obiography. Written in his fifties, the *Confessions* doesn't tell us much we do not ow if we have read his novels or reflect- on his plays. We learn that he mastur- ed and had sexual hang-ups, both phys- and psychic; we discern the subjective gins of allegedly objective thought. But

Confessions is more fun to read than the els, because it doesn't declaim or preach. st tells stories simply and tries to explain man. And it is fun because the sentiment t turned into ideas in Rousseau's other ks is allowed to run free, free of cum-

bersome theories, almost free of Rousseau's nagging at the world, while he tells us what a good boy he was even when he wasn't.

Although Rousseau's persecution mania only hit its stride in the 1770s, the second part of the *Confessions* dwells heavily on the underhanded machinations of the author's foes, and mingles its tally of social rounds, promenades, flowers and music with tales of spies, betrayal, disloyalty and unprovoked aggression. The legacy of the book, though, lies elsewhere. The message conveyed is that sincerity is the ultimate virtue, excusing everything, however ridiculous or wrong. Not unrelated to this is another theme with a great future: that of the hero as victim, rejecting responsibility for his acts, words, writings, blunders, blasphemies, because they

were sincere, well intentioned, in good faith, or because sincerity in confession deserves absolution. The first autobiography we have was that of St. Augustine, who wanted to bring his readers to God. The next important one, Rousseau's, wanted only to attract sympathy.

Clearly, the future lay with Rousseau.

The University Press of New England, which has been publishing *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* volume by volume, provides these new *Confessions*, enhanced by revealing slices of the correspondence, in the translation of Christopher Kelly, who also contributes an exemplary introduction and notes. An English translation of the French classic has to bear comparison with J.M. Cohen's Penguin Classics version of 1953. Kelly passes that test with flying colors. He hews a bit closer to the original text than Cohen, reads a smidgen more literally and hence less easily, but provides more notes, explanations, identifications. The Penguin Classics version wins hands-down on price. But Kelly's will certainly endure as the work of reference in English, as Bernard Gagnebin's Pléiade edition of 1959 provides the basic reference in French.

"Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau," scolded William Blake; "Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain!" But it wasn't. It was not mockery, for Voltaire's derision was profoundly serious, and Rousseau would not have known how to mock if he had tried. It was not vain, for the sand he threw against the wind was only blown the wider. □

In Brief

Mailer Tracks Down the Lone Assassin

IN A 1992 LETTER TO *THE NEW YORK Times*, William Manchester put his finger on why the Kennedy assassination continues to fascinate and puzzle us. It may seem odd, Manchester wrote, but there is an aesthetic principle at root. Put "the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, [and] it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning..."

In his 26th book Norman Mailer accepts—no—embraces the aesthetic challenge Manchester identified. It is a chal-



• Lee Harvey Oswald: Tragic rather than absurd

lenge, ter (al had n Death its pu palpal vey C man i gener sin is with talen from back M. Law: for C The task given accu Osw sper mov simi subj tive rat wor upc with this and dia No lar but bac sha doo rat

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lenge, interestingly enough, that Manchester (along with the Warren Commission) had no small part in creating. Rereading *Death of a President* almost 30 years after its publication, one is struck by the author's palpable, barely suppressed fury at Lee Harvey Oswald for killing the most powerful man in the world and robbing Manchester's generation of its first president. The assassin is beneath contempt, a callow nonentity with a mail-order rifle. Could even the most talented writer rescue Oswald from this fate and give this killer back his humanity?

Mailer and his collaborator, Lawrence Schiller, did just that for Gary Gilmore 16 years ago in *The Executioner's Song*. But the task here is even more difficult, given the layers of cant and crud that have accumulated over 30 years. The best part of *Oswald's Tale*, covering the 2½ years he spent in Russia (1959-1962), recalls the movie *Citizen Kane*, for the approaches are similar. Like Welles, Mailer cleanses his subject by refusing to adopt an authoritative narrative; the account is an exploration rather than a solution, and the posture works brilliantly. Mailer painstakingly draws upon many voices and sources—interviews with friends and family, KGB reports on this strange American, diplomatic cables, and Oswald's self-described "historic" diary—to assemble a compelling mosaic. No one of these rough, sometimes irregular pieces presents Oswald in the round, but the accumulated effect, when one draws back, is stunning. Perhaps it is an illusion shared by the writer and reader, but Oswald does begin to be comprehensible, a tragic rather than absurd figure.

Mailer/Schiller spent six months in Moscow and Minsk gathering information and impressions; it was what Mailer calls "the equivalent of an Oklahoma land-grab for an author." They were armed with a promise from the Belorussian KGB that it would open its files on Oswald in Minsk, and although the materials were less comprehensive than promised (or imagined?), they enabled Mailer to reconstruct an important and largely undocumented part of Oswald's life. Oswald lived in a bell jar, and before the state security organs decided that he was boring, no movement, conversation or contact was too insignificant to be recorded by the KGB—literally. Observation reports and tape recordings of Mari-

na and Lee are used sparingly but to great effect. The end of the Cold War also meant that the Oswalds' Russian and Belorussian acquaintances were free to talk about the defector in their midst, and these testimonies are persuasive more than 30 years after the KGB warned friends, former lovers and enemies alike to keep their mouths shut.

Shortly after Oswald leaves Minsk, however, the book begins to falter. So much so that one is tempted to believe the author's original conception was "Oswald in Minsk" rather than *Oswald's Tale*, and that Mailer began the project fully expecting the Soviet archives to reveal that Oswald was working for a secret agency (CIA or KGB). But Mailer became utterly convinced that no one sent Oswald to spy on Russia, and that the KGB had no interest whatsoever in recruiting him once he arrived uninvited. The only secret power center Oswald worked for was the one "in the privacy of his own mind," Mailer writes.

Conceptions often must be altered in midstream, of course, and Mailer musters a good argument for forging ahead. He likens the chapters on Moscow and Minsk to a base camp, from which he will launch an assault on the "greatest mountain of mystery in the 20th century." Yet that expedition proves to be nothing more than a running, occasionally amusing or interesting, commentary on testimony excised from the exhaustive Warren Commission hearings—some of which is reprinted—along with so many excerpts from Priscilla Johnson McMillan's 1977 biography, *Marina and Lee*, that she deserves a royalty cut. There is, literally, nothing new here.

To Mailer's credit, he cast aside his initial prejudices and wrote a work that concludes, albeit grudgingly, that Oswald "had the character to kill Kennedy, and that he probably did it alone." This was not virgin territory, after all, for Mailer. He has publicly praised different conspiracy theories for years, and Oliver Stone in particular for supposedly driving out nonsense ("the mind-stultifying myth of the lone assassin") with superior nonsense. Yet ultimately Mailer lacks the guts to say what needs to be said besides the fact that Oswald was the assassin: The Warren Commission got it right.

—Max Holland

**OSWALD'S
TALE: An
American
Mystery**
by Norman Mailer
Random House,
848 pp., \$30



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• "The Great Trees" (Albert Bierstadt, 1876)

An Eye on the Natural World

IF YOU WONDER WHY AMERICAN literature tends toward the abstract and the allegorical while English fiction is usually tidy, contained and concrete, you have only to consult Gertrude Stein's marvelous essay "What Is English Literature."

Here she comments on the effects of landscape—on the way the English language,

developed to fit a tiny island, had to stretch and re-create itself to cover a whole continent. "In England the daily island life was the daily life and it was solidly that daily life and they generally always simply relied on it," Stein accurately observes, whereas in America "the daily everything was not the daily living and generally speaking there is not a daily everything." Therefore, as she goes on to point out, American writing has "inside it a separation, a separation from what is chosen to what is that from which it has

**LANDSCAPE
AND MEMORY**
by Simon Schama
Knopf,
672 pp., \$40